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Pollmann, Monique; Krahmer, E.J.

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Do friends communicate better than strangers?

Monique M.H. Pollmann, Emiel J. Krahmer

Department of Communication and Information Sciences, Tilburg University, The Netherlands
m.m.h.pollmann@uvt.nl

INTRODUCTION

- Folk wisdom says that good friends only need a few words to understand each other
- Misleading citations of a study on audience design (Fussell & Krauss 1989) has led to the belief that there is scientific evidence for this claim.
- Fussell and Krauss let people describe abstract figures for a friend. The descriptions designed are given to the friend or to a stranger → the friends outperform strangers. Messages were not designed for strangers.
- There is still reason to believe that friends are more accurate and more efficient than strangers in describing things to each other, because they can make use of both common knowledge and shared knowledge (Lee, 2001).
- Friends can choose to describe 'Johnny Depp' based on common knowledge: 'He played Jack Sparrow' or on shared knowledge: 'The actor that you were in love with when you were 13'. Strangers don't have that choice.

Do friends communicate more accurately and efficiently than strangers, because they strategically use shared knowledge?

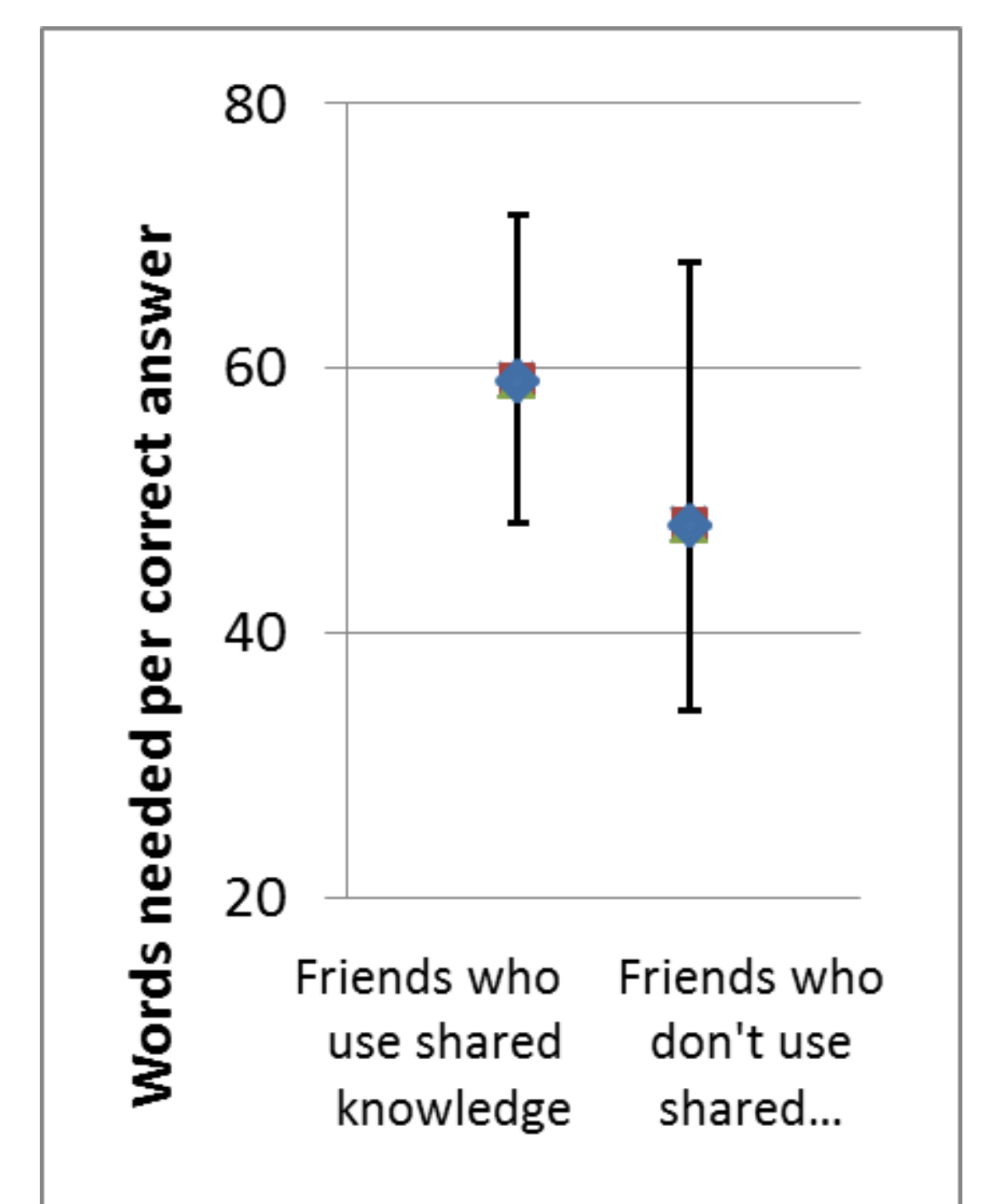
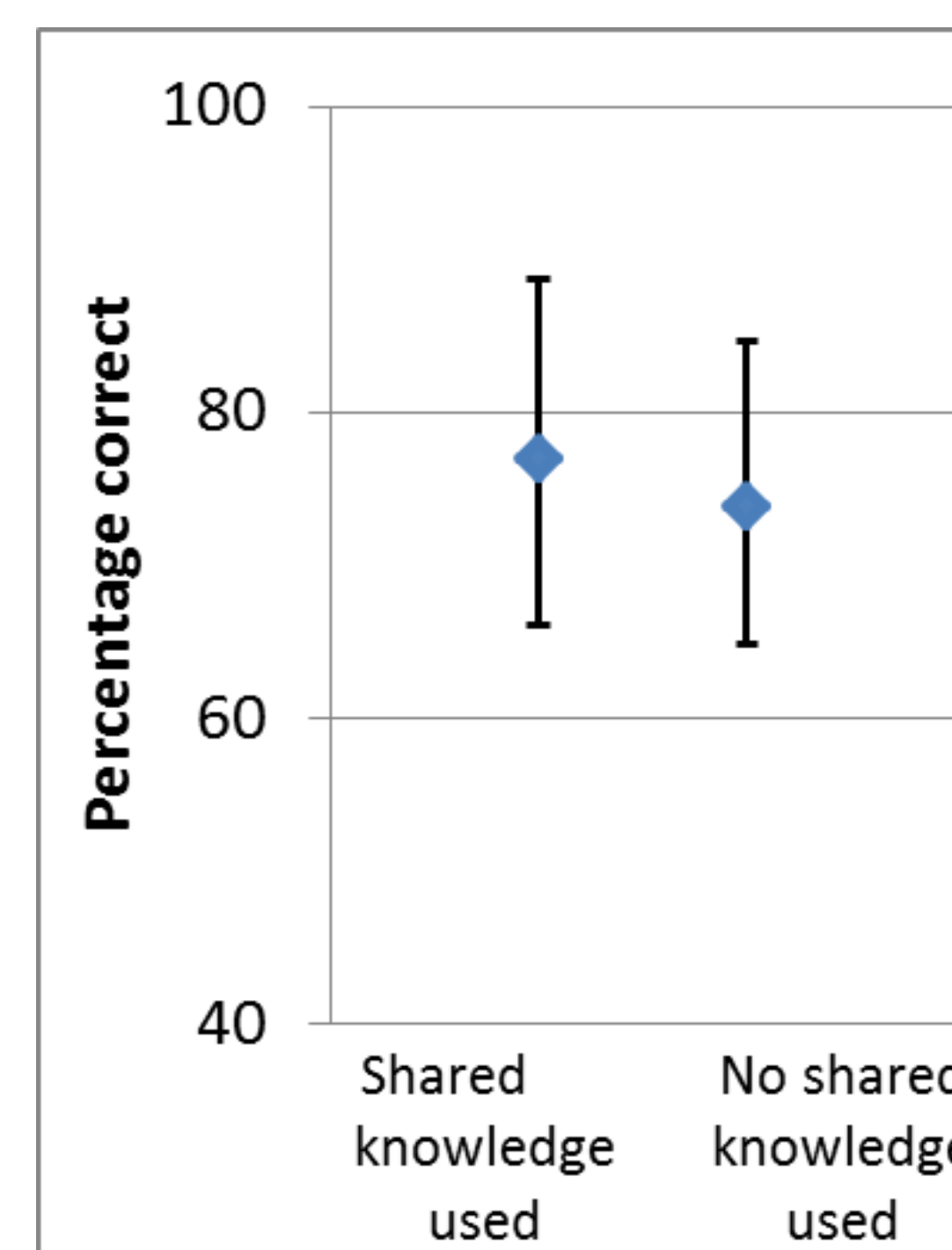
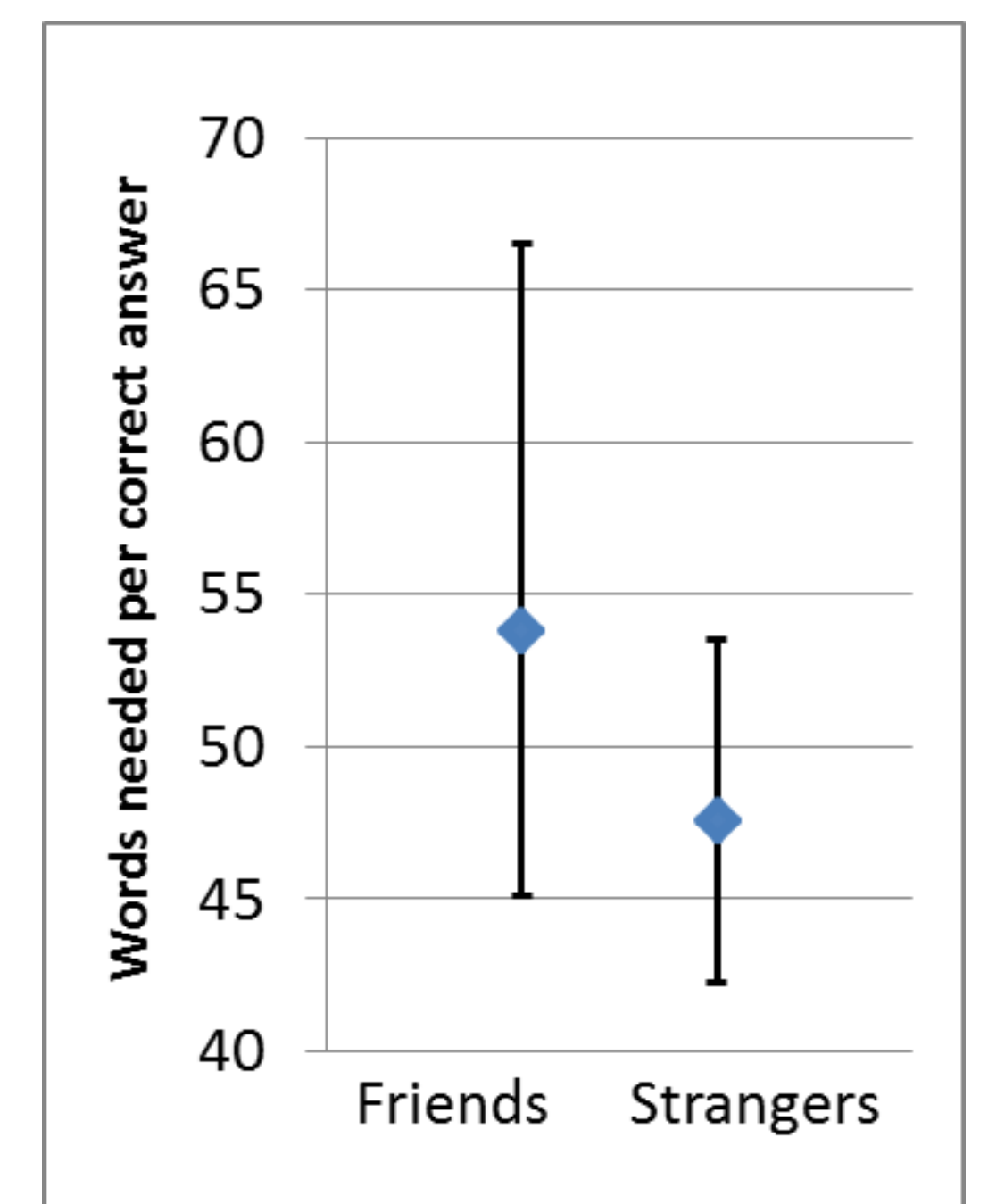
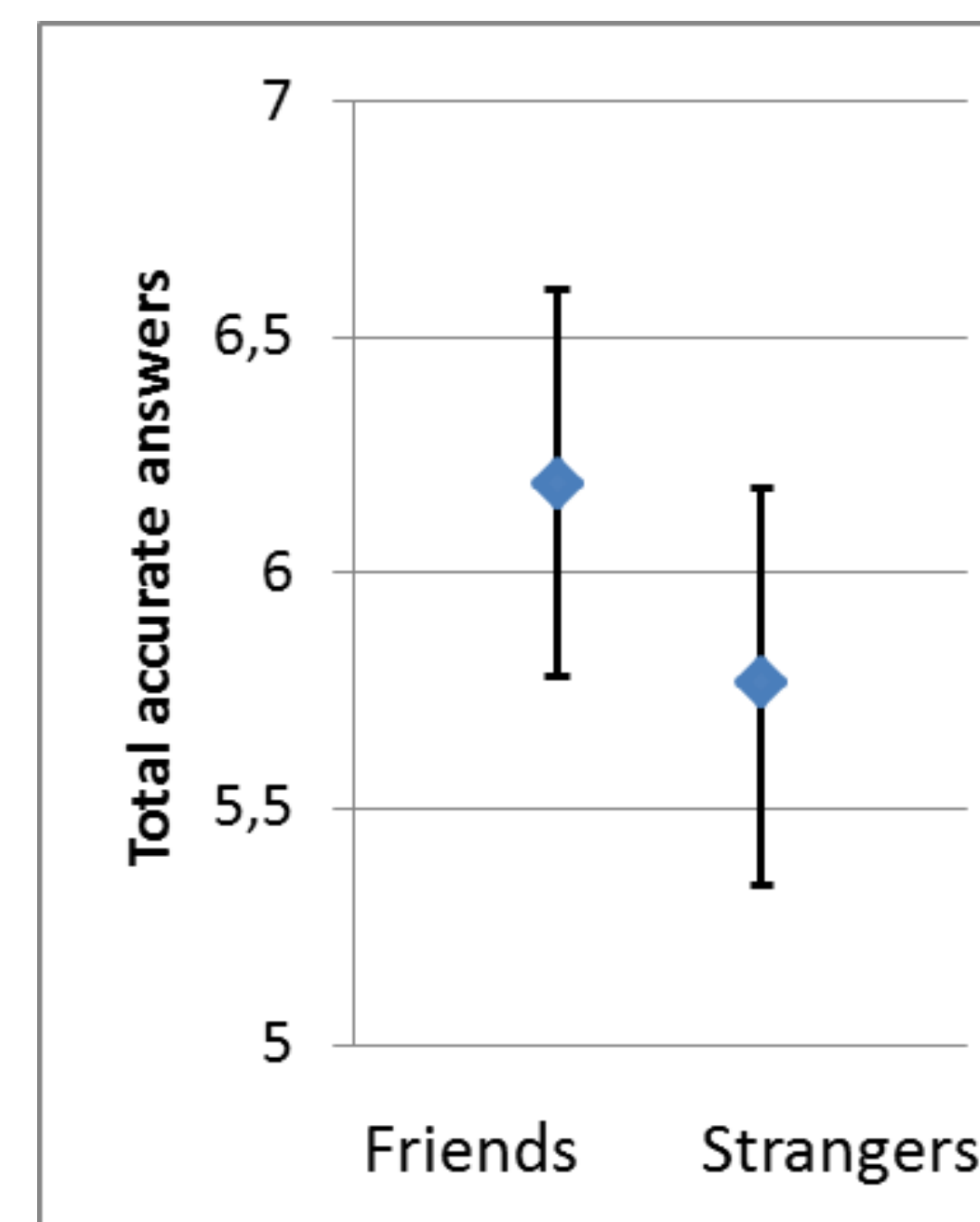
METHODS

- Based on the game Taboo, in which common objects need to be described without using five taboo words
- E.g. 'Johnny Depp' needs to be described without saying actor, cinema, movie, America, and pirate.
- 210 Participants were asked to send out an email to a friend or a stranger (another participant's friend) with descriptions of 10 terms →
- Descriptions were coded by 3 independent coders for the use of shared knowledge (93.6% agreement)
- Friends were more likely to respond to the email than strangers (102 vs. 78).



RESULTS

- Friends use shared knowledge in 13.8% of their descriptions.
- For example: "I think this is a handsome man. ... We have been watching him together several times." (Johnny Depp), or "On vacation you took funny pictures of Jan and Bart using this item" (trampoline)



DISCUSSION

- Friends are not better in describing things to each other than strangers.
- The folk wisdom that friends only need a few words to understand each other is also not supported
- People can successfully design messages to be understood by a specific receiver.
- Shared knowledge is used, but not strategically, to make descriptions more efficient.
- Although friends are not better in describing things, their descriptions may be more entertaining.

References

- Fussell, S. R., & Krauss, R. M. (1989). Understanding friends and strangers: The effects of audience design on message comprehension. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 19(6), 509-525.
- Lee, B. P. (2001). Mutual knowledge, background knowledge and shared beliefs: Their roles in establishing common ground. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33(1), 21-44.

Department of Communication and Information Sciences